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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM SCUL VE
SUBJECT: POOR TURNOUT AT RCTV SOLIDARITY MARCH

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The highly publicized April 21 opposition demonstration to protest the government's decision to revoke independent television station Radio Caracas Television's (RCTV's) broadcasting license on May 28 failed to generate a significant show of public support. The march's coordinators accused the BRV of fear mongering in the days leading up to the event and of blocking access to the march. Poor coordination among opposition groups also contributed to the relatively poor turnout. RCTV's management team nevertheless remains hopeful about the outlet's future, notwithstanding President Chavez' and Telecommunications Minister Jesse Chacon's recent statements reaffirming the BRV's intention to close RCTV. End Summary.

Disappointing Turnout

¶2. (SBU) A crowd of demonstrators stretching five city blocks marched to Radio Caracas Television's (RCTV's) headquarters April 21 to protest the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV's) decision not to renew the opposition outlet's broadcasting license. The event's organizers, over 25 civil society organizations and political parties, including the Venezuelan Worker's Confederation (CTV), COPEI, Accion Democratica (AD), Primera Justicia (PJ), the National Resistance Movement (CNR), and Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), were unable to deliver the large turnout they initially promised. The BRV estimated the crowd at 3,000-4,000; UNT leaders assert the crowd numbered some 16,000.

¶3. (SBU) The event's organizers criticized BRV officials for failing to provide the necessary safeguards to protect the protesters and for inculcating fear in potential participants. On March 8, for example, the CNR requested a permit from Libertador municipality officials to conduct the demonstration. The permit was never issued, potentially discouraging some RCTV sympathizers from participating. Separately, Minister of Popular Power for Communication and Information William Lara asked government supporters on March 20 to attend the demonstration because the protesters represented "violent, radical sectors who receive national and international financing and could attempt destabilizing acts." Moreover, on the morning of the event, the march's coordinators accused the National Guard of setting up makeshift roadblocks and prohibiting ingress to protesters

coming from out-of-town.

UNT Jumps the Gun

14. (C) Former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales' political party, UNT, convoked their own demonstration in Caracas April 19, possibly affecting turnout at RCTV's event. UNT supporters marched to the Organization of State's (OAS') Caracas office to present a document detailing "the democratic deficit" that exists in Venezuela, including President Chavez' efforts to politicize the judiciary and the BRV's refusal to renew RCTV's license. UNT logistics coordinator Anibal Sanchez told Poloff April 23 that his party's march was planned to coincide with Venezuela's Declaration of Independence Day, April 19, and did not intend to draw attention away from RCTV's scheduled event. UNT Foreign Policy Coordinator Timoteo Zambrano told poloffs April 24 that the UNT march was an integral part of the party's international strategy.

Chavez: I Won't Be Pressured

15. (SBU) Chavez responded harshly to the march during the April 22 television broadcast of his show "Alo, Presidente." The Venezuelan president insisted that he will not change his mind about RCTV, regardless of national protests or pressure from international organizations. "No, I won't be pressured. On May 28, (RCTV's) concession ends and that's it...Forget about it, it's over," Chavez said. Speaking to the Ministers of Popular Power for Defense and Interior/Justice, Chavez added, "each of you should begin preparing your plans for counterattack. If (the opposition) attacks, the counterattack will be devastating. It will be popular and militaristic." Minister of Popular Power for

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Telecommunications Jesse Chacon has also reaffirmed the BRV's intention to close RCTV.

RCTV Management Remains Optimistic

16. (C) Public Affairs Officer met with General Manager for RCTV Daniela Bergami on April 23 to discuss the march. Bergami characterized the event as overwhelmingly successful and expressed satisfaction with the turnout. Despite Chavez' repeated promises to revoke RCTV's license, Bergami remained optimistic about RCTV's future. She said Chavez had two options: he could either "radicalize the revolution," and revoke RCTV's license, or he could maintain the facade of a democracy and stop short of revoking RCTV's license. Bergami still believes Chavez, despite his consistent public statements to the contrary, will ultimately choose the latter course.

Comment

17. (C) Despite considerable publicity for it, the April 21 RCTV solidarity march did not meet the stated expectations of its backers. Although public opinion polls show strong support for RCTV, march organizers failed to overcome the general sense of resignation that pervades opposition circles. Moreover, the abstract issue of freedom of expression has yet to resonate at the grassroots level. The event's poor turnout was not lost on Chavez, who quickly capitalized on the opportunity to affirm his position regarding RCTV. Absent considerably more domestic and international pressure on the BRV, Post believes RCTV's license will merely be but a minor speed bump in the BRV's

race to undermine the free press in Venezuela.

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